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SONNETS

OF

THE WINGLESS HOURS.

BY

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Author of

*'The New Medusa,' 'Imaginary Sonnets,' 'The Fountain
of Youth,' etc.*



LONDON :

ELLIOT STOCK, 62, PATERNOSTER ROW.

1894.

PR
4879
L53S6
1894



TO
LIZZIE MARY LITTLE.



PREFACE.



IN offering the following hundred sonnets to the reader, it is perhaps only proper to premise that thirty out of the number have already appeared in previous publications among miscellaneous poems, and have been included in the present collection either because they have been rewritten, or because they form necessary links to connect with each other the seventy sonnets which now appear for the first time in volume shape.



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SECTION I.

A WHEELED BED

1873—1893

B



TO THE MUSE.

I.

TO keep through life the posture of the grave,
While others walk and run and dance and leap;
To keep it ever, waking or asleep,
While shrink the limbs that Nature goodly gave;

In summer's heat no more to breast the wave;
No more to wade through seeded grasses deep;
Nor tread the cornfield where the reapers reap;
Nor stretch free limbs beneath a leafy nave:

'Tis hard, 'tis hard; and so in winter too,
'Tis hard to hear no more the sweet faint creak
Of the crisp snow, the frozen earth's clear ring,

Where ripe blue sloes and crimson berries woo
The hopping redbreast. But when thou dost seek
My lonely room, sweet Muse, Despair takes wing.

II.

OH, were it not for thee, the dull dead weight
Of Time's great coils, too sluggishly unroll'd,
Which seem to creep across me fold on fold
As I lie prostrate, were for strength too great :

For health and motion are not all that Fate,
As years go by, continues to withhold ;
A yet more noble birthright once was sold
For one small mess of pottage that I ate ;

And like that king, who, prison'd underground
In caves of treasure, saw his starving self
Derided by uneatable gold all round,

I fix my hungry eyes where, cruelly near,
Are standing closed, on every mocking shelf,
The books I dare not read and dare not hear.

FAIRY GODMOTHERS.

I THINK the Fairies to my christening came :

But they were wicked sprites, and envious elves,
Who brought me gall, as bitter as themselves,
In tiny tankards wrought with fairy flame.

They wished me love of books—each little dame—

With power to read no book upon my shelves ;
Fair limbs—for palsy ;—Dead Sea fruits by twelves
And every bitter blessing you can name.

But one good Elf there was ; and she let fall

A single drop of Poesy's wine of gold
In every little tankard full of gall :

So year by year, as woes and pains grow old,

The little golden drop is in them all ;
But bitterer is the cup than can be told.

IN DREAMS.

THINK not I lie upon this couch of pain
Eternally, and motionless as clay—
Summer and winter, night as well as day—
Appealing to the heartless years in vain :

For now and then the dreams at night unchain
My stiffened limbs, and lift the links that weigh
As iron never weighed, and let me stray
Free as the wind that ripples through the grain.

Then can I walk once more, yea, run and leap ;
Tread Autumn's rustling leaves or Spring's young grass ;
Or stand and pant upon some bracing steep ;

Or, with the rod, across the wet stones pass
Some summer brook ; or on the firm skate sweep
In ceaseless circles Winter's fields of glass.

TWILIGHT.

A SUDDEN pang contracts the heart of Day,
As fades the glory of the sunken sun.
The bats replace the swallows one by one;
The cries of playing children die away.

Like one in pain, a bell begins to sway;
A few white oxen, from their labour done,
Pass ghostly through the dusk; the crone that spun
Outside her door, turns in, and all grows grey.

And still I lie, as I all day have lain,
Here in this garden, thinking of the time,
Before the years of helplessness and pain;

Or playing with the fringes of a rhyme,
Until the yellow moon, amid her train
Of throbbing stars, appears o'er yonder lime.

TO HEALTH.

O HEALTH, the years are passing one by one,
The Springs succeed the winters ; but each Spring
Finds me where Autumn left me, and thy wing
Touches me not, though priceless life-sands run.

I see Life's pleasures lost, Life's work undone,
And scan life's waste, which knows no altering,
Like those whose eyes, on sea or desert, cling
To the horizon which engulfs the sun.

Not the ten thousand, when they saw the sea,
A pale blue streak, from Asia's endless sand,
Shouted as I should shout at sight of thee ;

No, nor Columbus, when the dawn-breeze fanned
His long strained eyes, and round him thund'ringly
Rose to the clouds the cry, 'The land ! the land !'

LOST YEARS.

My boyhood went: it went where went the trace
Left by the pony's hoofs upon the sand;
It went where went the stream, sought rod in hand;
It went where went the ice on the pond's face.

Then went my youth: it went where Dawn doth chase
The ballroom's lights away with pearly wand;
It went where went the echoes of the band;
It went where go the nights that steal day's place.

And now my manhood goes where goes the song
Of captive birds, the cry of crippled things;
It goes where goes the day that unused dies.

The cage is narrow and the bars are strong
In which my restless spirit beats its wings;
And round me stretch unfathomable skies.

FOR THE FLY-LEAF OF 'LE MIE PRIGIONI.'

THERE was a Poet whom the Austrians cast
From dungeon into dungeon ; one whose pains,
Writ in this little book which ne'er complains,
Helped to raise Italy, like him chained fast ;

Whose countless counted minutes, in the vast
Silence of Spielberg, were to be as grains
For Freedom's golden harvest ; till his chains,
Made of mere steel, were stricken off at last.

What of the shadowy grates, the clankless links,
Which no lands watch, but which, like iron bars,
Quench Hope's thin flame, which slowly sinks and sinks?

They serve no cause ; they rouse no patriot wars ;
But through the bars of shadow and their chinks
A face can look, and twilight's few great stars.

A SNAILS' DERBY.

ONCE, in this Tuscan garden, Noon's huge ball
So slowly crossed the sky above my head,
As I lay idle on my dull wheeled bed,
That, sick of Day's inexorable crawl,

I set some snails a-racing on the wall—
With their striped shells upon their backs, instead
Of motley jockeys—black, white, yellow, red ;
And watched them till the twilight's tardy fall.

And such my life, as years go one by one :
A garden where I lie beyond the flowers,
And where the snails outrace the creeping sun.

For me there are no pinions to the hours ;
Compared with them, the snails like racers run :
Wait but Death's night ; and, lo, the great ball lowers.

RIVER BABBLE.

I.

THE wreathing of my rhymes has helped to chase
Away despair from many a wingless day ;
And in the corners of my heart I pray
That they may last, or leave at least some trace :

Yet would I tear them all, could that replace
The fly-rod in my hand, this eve of May ;
And watch the paper fragments float away
Into oblivion, on a trout-stream's face.

Thou fool, thou fool ! thou weary, crippled fool !
Thou never more wilt leap from stone to stone
Where rise the trout in every rocky pool ;

Thou never more wilt stand at dusk alone
Beside the humming waters, in the cool,
Where dance the flies, and make the trout thy own !

II.

AND yet I think—if ever years awoke
My limbs to motion, so that I could stand
Again beside a river, rod in hand,
As Evening spreads his solitary cloak—

That I would leave the little speckled folk
Their happy life—their marvellous command
Of stream's wild ways—and break the cruel wand,
To let them cleave the current at a stroke,

As I myself once could.—Oh, it were sweet
To ride the running ripple of the wave
As long ago, when wanes the long day's heat ;

Or search, in daring headers, what gems pave
The river bed, until the bold hands meet,
In depths of beryl, what the trick'd eyes crave

TO OTHERS.

YE who can roam where thrills the tawny corn,
Or wade through seeded grass, or who can stray
Across the meadows as they make the hay,
Or where the dewdrop sparkles on the thorn—

If you could lose, but for a single day,
Your use of limb, your power to pluck the may
In rutty laes where thrushes sing all day,
I wonder, would you speak of life with scorn ?

God knows, I would not keep you pent for long
In that close cage where anguish pecks the husk
Of Life's spilt millet, upon which it thrives;

But long enough to let you learn the song
Which captive thrushes sing from dawn to dusk :
An hour or two would make you love your lives.

KING CHRISTMAS.

Now Old King Christmas, bearded hoary-white,
Comes with his holly and carousing noise,
Barons of beef, mince pies, and wassail joys,
And flame surrounds the pudding blue and bright ;

And now the fir-trees, as he comes in sight,
Acclaimed by eager blue-eyed girls and boys,
Burst into tinsel fruit and glittering toys,
And turn into a pyramid of light.

I love, in fancy, still to see them all,
Those happy children round the dazzling tree
Which fills the room with scents of fir and wax ;

For still I love that life's sweet things should fall
Into the lap of others ; though, for me,
The gift of Christmas is but pain that racks.

AN ELFIN SKATE.

I.

THEY wheeled me up the snow-cleared garden way,
And left me where the dazzling heaps were thrown ;
And as I mused on winter sports once known,
Up came a tiny man to where I lay.

He was six inches high ; his beard was gray
As silver frost ; his coat and cap were brown,
Of mouse's fur ; while two wee skates hung down
From his wee belt, and gleamed in winter's ray.

He clambered up my couch, and eyed me long.
'Show me thy skates,' said I ; 'for once, alas !
I, too, could skate. What pixie mayst thou be ?'

'I am the king,' he answered, 'of the throng
Called Winter Elves. We live in roots, and pass
The summer months in sleep. Frost sets us free.'

II.

'We find by moonlight little pools of ice,
Just one yard wide,' the imp of winter said;
'And skate all night, while mortals are in bed,
In tiny circles of our Elf device;

And when it snows we harness forest mice
To wee bark sleighs, with lightest fibrous thread,
And scour the woods; or play all night instead
With snowballs large as peas, well patted thrice.

But is it true, as I have heard them say,
That thou canst share in winter games no more,
But liest motionless year in, year out?

That must be hard. To-day I cannot stay,
But I'll return each year, when all is hoar,
And tell thee when the skaters are about.'

III.

ON my wheeled bed, I let my fingers play
With a wee silver skate, scarce one inch long,
Which might have fitted one of Frost's Elf throng,
Or been his gift to one whose limbs are clay.

But Elfdom's dead ; and what in my hand lay
Was out of an old desk, from years when, strong
And full of health, life sang me still its song ;
A skating club's small badge, long stowed away.

Oh, there is nothing like the skater's art—
The poetry of circles ; nothing like
The fleeting beauty of his crystal floor.

Above his head the winter sunbeams dart ;
Beneath his feet flits fast the frightened pike.
Skate while you may ; the morrow skates no more.

TO MY WHEELED BED.

HYBRID of rack and of Procrustes' bed,
Thou thing of wood, of leather, and of steel,
Round which, by day and night, at head and heel,
Crouch shadowy Tormentors, dumb and dread;

Round which the wingless Hours, with feet of lead
For ever crawl, in spite of fierce appeal,
And the dark Terrors dance their silent reel;
What will they do with thee when I am dead?

Lest men should ask, who find thee stowed away
In some old lumber room, what wretch was he
Who used so strange an engine night and day,

Fain would I have thee shivered utterly;
For, please the Fates, no other son of clay
Will ever need so dire a bed as thee.

CORSO DE' FIORI.

THIS is the Fight of Roses; and to-day
Florence does credit to its flow'ry name;
And every carriage, rose-wreathed wheel and frame,
Panel and trappings, seeks the dewy fray

To fling its yellow rosebuds, or display
Bright silk-clad human blossoms; till the flame
Of sunset dwindles, and the fair hands aim
Their last wet rose as daylight wanes away.

And all are gone to see it, and to breathe
Great April's breath, who marshals his approach
With such a pomp and pageantry of hue,

That even I have half a mind to wreath
The wheels of my uncomfortable coach
With rose-buds, too, to give great Spring his due.

AT REST.

MAKE me in marble after I am dead ;
 Stretched out recumbent, just as I have lain ;
 That those who care may see me once again
Such as they knew me on my hard wheeled bed :

Save that the motionless and marble head
 Will never ache with hope for ever vain ;
 And down the marble limbs the waves of pain
Will never race, but all be peace instead.

And this be writ: The same blind silent weight
 That moves the planets kept him on his back
And forced him in his misery to create.

He lay for years upon a daily rack ;
 He grudged to none their freer, happier fate ;
He hoped no heaven, nor deemed the world all black.

EAGLES OF TIBERIUS.

THEY say at Capri that Tiberius bound
His slaves to eagles, when he had them flung
In the abysses, from the rocks that hung
Beetling above the sea and the sea's sound.

Slowly the eagle, struggling round and round
With the gagged slave that from his talons swung,
Sank through the air, to which he fiercely clung,
Until the sea caught both, and both were drowned.

O eagle of the Spirit, hold thy own ;
Work thy great wings, and grapple to the sky ;
Let not this shackled body drag thee down

Into that stagnant sea where, by-and-by,
The ethereal and the clayey both must drown,
Bound by a link which neither can untie !

TO MY TORTOISE CHRONOS.

THOU vague dumb crawler with the groping head
As listless to the sun as to the show'rs,
Thou very image of the wingless Hours
Now creeping past me with their feet of lead :

For thee and me the same small garden bed
Is the whole world : the same half life is ours ;
And year by year, as Fate restricts my pow'rs,
I grow more like thee, and the soul grows dead.

No, Tortoise : from thy like in days of old
Was made the living lyre ; and mighty strings
Spanned thy green shell with pure vibrating gold.

The notes soared up, on strong but trembling wings,
Through ether's lower zones ; then growing bold,
Spurned earth for ever and its wingless things.

THE SUN-DIAL.

I.

THE sun is shining through a hot white veil ;
And round the faded sun-dial, on the face
Of this old Tuscan house, whose narrow space
Prisons my life, the pointing shade creeps pale.

More sluggish than the dusty sun-baked snail,
On the same wall, it keeps its gnawing pace,
The shadow of a shade, faint as the trace
Of Life's lost pleasures, up the dull old scale.

Thou shade of woe, that creep'st at Fate's command,
Say, must the body wait till it be dead
To quit this numbing stretcher of disease ?

Oh, is there no Isaiah in the land,
To raise me from this miserable bed
And make the shadow leap the ten degrees ?

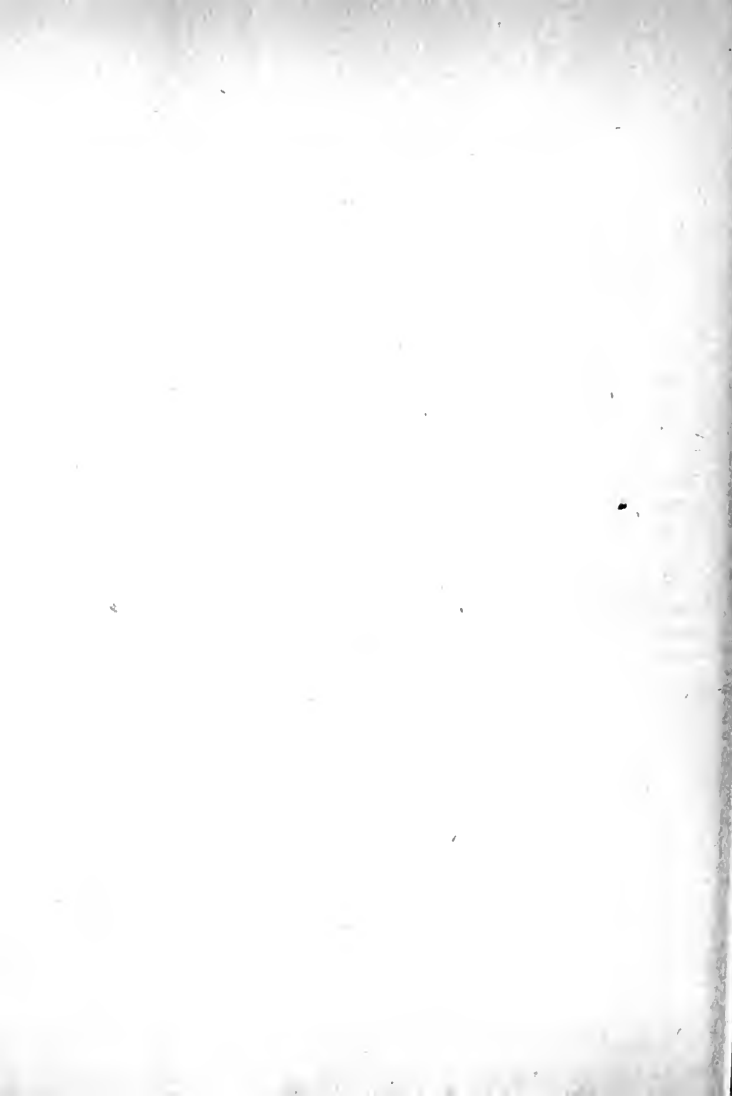
II.

No, there is no tall prophet at my call
Flame-eyed, imperious, doomed to wooden saws,
To stretch his rod athwart eternal laws
And juggle with the shadow on the wall.

No Ahaz' sun-dial this. The earth's dumb ball,
Through the blind Heaven of effect and cause,
Rolls on and on ;—and on, without a pause
The shadow creeps, to merge in Night's great pall.

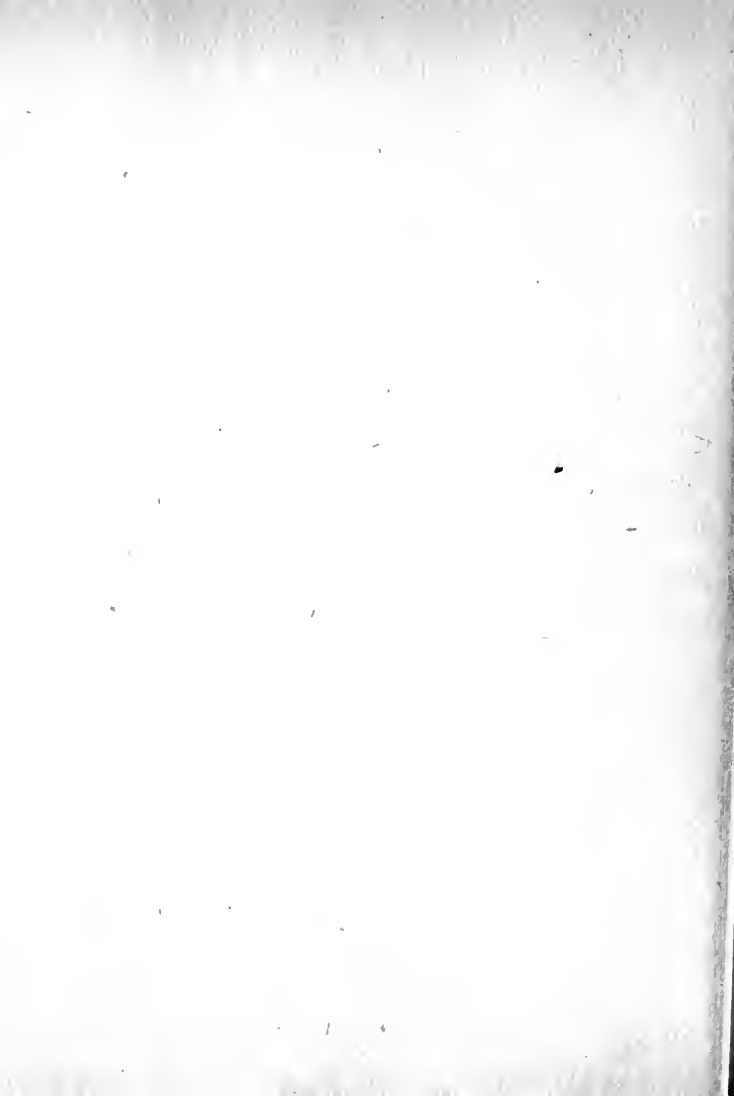
Then list, ye Hours.—Since it is writ on high
That none shall help me in my silent fight,
Creep but for me, and fast for others fly :

So shall I lie content, and deem things right,
And heave at most a wistful waiting sigh,
For death's unstarr'd, but hospitable night.



SECTION II.

BRUSH AND CHISEL



ON A GROUP OF FRA ANGELICO'S ANGELS.

WHAT Tuscan sunset, what aerial gold,
Condensed its flakes to make these aureoled shapes,
These bright winged trumpeters that colour drapes
In robes of glow and wonder from of old;

As if they roamed those pale-green depths that hold
The topaz isles and diamond-outlined capes,
When, through the West's great gate, as he escapes,
Light flings his fan, for seraphim to fold?

Or were they born of such bright drifts as now,
Like countless cherub winglets of gold down,
Are crossing Florence at the Angels' hour;

When through the summer air comes deep and slow
Across the olive hill which hides the town,
The boom of a great bell from Giotto's* tower?

* The word 'Giotto' is a dissyllable. In Italian *Gi* before another vowel is equivalent to our *J*.

THE EVER YOUNG.

I.

THERE are round lips that once obtained a draught
From the deep sapphire of the Fount of Youth ;
Lips old, yet young, whose smile attests the truth
Of that great dream at which the wise have laughed ;

And there are brows, which still, by magic craft,
Defy the years that know nor rest nor ruth,
And which remain, in spite of Time's dull tooth,
As radiant as the wondrous water quaffed.

But not of living flesh and blood are they ;
And Art alone can give their long youth birth,
And bid them keep it while mere men grow gray.

Art makes the only ever young on earth ;
Shapes which can keep, till crumbled quite away,
A young saint's rapture or a young faun's mirth.

II.

WHAT impious wrinkle ever marred the cheek
Of that proud beauty, armless from of old,
Who stands, though twenty centuries are scroll'd,
Young as when first she smiled upon the Greek ?

What thread of silver ever dared to streak
The wavy wonder of the wanton gold
Round Titian's Magdalen, while men behold
Each other whiten as their lives grow bleak ?

And those more breathing beings that the pen
Creates of subtler substance than the brush
Or chisel ever dealt with—What of them ?

Are Juliet's eyes less bright in those of men,
Her cheek less oval ; and will ages crush
The youth from out Pompilia's frail cut stem ?

III.

AND yet Art's wonders are at last Death's prize :
The shattered marble crumbles into lime ;
Canvas and Fresco perish under grime ;
The pen's great shapes will die when language dies.

'The Milo stone will go where lime's dust flies,
And Titian's Magdalen turn black with time ;
Juliet will end with England's tongue and rhyme,
Pompilia, too, that other shapes may rise.

But not a wrinkle will o'ercreep their brow,
Nor thread of silver mar the locks we love,
However oft a century's knell has rung :

And when they die they will be fair as now ;
For they are cherished by the gods above ;
And those the gods are fond of, perish young.

ON RAPHAEL'S ARCHANGEL, MICHAEL.

FROM out the depths of crocus-coloured morn,
With rush of wings, the young Archangel came,
And diamond spear; and leapt, as leaps a flame,
On Satan, where the light was scarcely born;

And roll'd the sunless Rebel, bruis'd and torn,
Upon the earth's bare plain, in dust and shame,
Holding awhile his spear's suspended aim
Above the rayless head in radiant scorn.

So leaps within the soul on Wrong or Lust
The warrior Angel whom we deem not near,
And rolls the rebel impulse in the dust,

Scathing its neck with his triumphal tread,
And holding high his bright coercing spear
Above its inexterminable head.

ON TWO OF SIGNORELLI'S FRESCOES.

I.—THE RISING OF THE DEAD.

I SAW a vast bare plain, and, overhead,
A half-chilled sun that shed a sickly light ;
While far and wide, till out of reach of sight,
The earth's thin crust was heaving with the dead,

Who, as they struggled from their dusty bed,
At first mere bones, by countless years made white,
Took gradual flesh, and stood all huddled tight
In mute, dull groups, as yet too numb to dread.

And all the while the summoning trump on high
With rolling thunder never ceased to shake
The livid vault of that unclouded sky,

Calling fresh hosts of skeletons to take
Each his identity ; until well-nigh
The whole dry worn-out earth appeared to wake.

II.—THE BINDING OF THE LOST.

IN monstrous caverns, lit but by the glare
From pools of molten stone, the lost are pent
In silent herds,—dim, shadowy, vaguely blent,
Yet each alone with his own black despair;

While, through the thickness of the lurid air,
The flying fiends, from some far unseen vent,
Bring on their bat-wing'd backs, in swift descent,
The souls who swell the waiting myriads there.

And then begins the binding of the lost
With snaky thongs, before they be transferred
To realms of utter flame or utter frost;

And, like a sudden ocean boom, is heard,
Uprising from the dim and countless host,
Pain's first vague roar, Hell's first wild useless word.

THE WAIFS OF TIME.

WHEN some great ship has long ago been wreck'd,
And the repentant waves have long since laid
Upon the beach the booty that they made,
And few remember still, and none expect,

The Sea will sometimes suddenly eject
A lonely shattered waif, still undecayed,
That tells of lives with which an old storm played,
In a carved name that graybeards recollect.

So ever and anon the soundless sea
Which we call Time, casts up upon the strand
Some tardy waif from lost antiquity:

A stained maimed god, a faun with shattered hand,
From Art's great wreck is suddenly set free,
And stands before us as immortals stand.

TO THE SO-CALLED VENUS OF MILO.

I.

THOU armless Splendour, Victory's own breath ;
Embraceless Beauty, Strength bereft of hands ;
To whose high pedestal a hundred lands
Send rent of awe, and sons to stand beneath ;

To whom Adonis never brought a wreath,
Nor Tannhäuser a song, but whose commands
Were blindly followed, by immortal bands
Who wooed thee at Thermopylæ in death :

No Venus thou ; but nurse of legions steeled
By Freedom's self, where rang her highest note,
And never has thy bosom felt a kiss :

No Venus thou ; but on the golden shield
Which once thy lost left held, thy lost right wrote :
'At Marathon and briny Salamis.'

II.

PERHAPS thy arms are lying where they hold
The roots of some old olive, which strikes deep
In Attic earth ; or where the Greek girls reap,
With echoes of the harvest hymns of old ;

Or haply in some seaweed-cushioned fold
Of warm Greek seas, which shadows of ships sweep,
While prying dolphins through the green ribs peep,
Of sunken galleys filled with Persian gold.

Or were they shattered,—pounded back to lime,
To make the mortar for some Turkish tower
Which overshadowed Freedom for a time ?

Or strewn as dust, to make, with sun and shower,
The grain and vine and olive of their clime,
As was the hand which wrought them in an hour ?

ON AN ILLUSTRATION IN DORÉ'S DANTE.

I.

No, Heaven is not like this; nor are the hosts
Of the Eternal Sunrise like these flocks
Of dim gray gulls, which seem from off the rocks
Of utmost Thulé's tempest-tortured coasts;

But brighter than the sparkling rosy frosts
Of topless Himalay, when Dawn unlocks
Light's doors on India; and the glory mocks
What rays then stream through Morning's cloudy posts.

I know it as I once was taken there
By one who held, though breathing still our air,
The diamond clue to that broad dream-made shore

'Where, the great multitude that no man knows,
In garments white as Lebanon's first snows,
Walk in the sunrise, knowing death no more.'

II.

WHEN Dante went with Beatrice of old
To Light's transcendent and eternal springs,
Where clustered angels glow in wondrous strings
Of mystic roses, wreathed and fast unrolled ;

Or when he saw, on incandescent gold,
The great quadrilles of seraphs form their rings
And wind in endless figures—all the wings
Were gleaming there, that Heaven can spread or fold.

And gleam they ever will, in the pure height
Of sky within us, when the soul upgoes
To spheres of higher self, from clods and night,

Where petals in the luminous gold unclose,
And angels, clustered in a rose of light,
Glow as a minster's great rose window glows.

ON MANTEGNA'S DRAWING OF JUDITH.

I.

WHAT stony, bloodless Judith hast thou made,
Mantegna—draped in many a stony fold ?
What walking sleeper whose benumb'd hands hold
A stony head and an unbloody blade ?

In thine own savage days, wast thou afraid
To paint such Judiths as thou mightst behold
In open street, and paint the heads that rolled
Beneath the axe, and that each square displayed ?

No, no ; not such was Judith, on the night
When, in the silent camp, she watched alone,
Like some dumb tigress, in the tent's dim light

Her sleeping prey ; nor when, her dark deed done,
She seized the head, and feasted thought and sight
Upon a ball that was no ball of stone.

II.

THERE was a gleam of jewels in the tent
Which one dim cresset lit—a baleful gleam—
And from his scattered armour seemed to stream
A dusky, evil light that came and went.

But from her eyes, as over him she bent,
Watching the surface of his drunken dream,
There shot a deadlier ray, a darker beam,
A look in which her life's one lust found vent.

There was a hissing through her tightened teeth,
As with her scimitar she crouched above
His dark, doomed head, and held her perilous breath,

While ever and anon she saw him move
His red lascivious lips, and smile beneath
His curled and scented beard, and mutter love.

ON THE HORSES OF ST. MARK.

THERE be four brazen stallions of the breed
That Niké drove at Marathon abreast,
Who march before St. Mark's with pace repress'd,
As if her self were curbing-in their speed ;

Marching as they have marched through crowd and creed
Down all Antiquity with clip-maned crest,
And through the Middle Times with broad bronze chest,
To trample down the Present like a reed.

They march towards the Future of the world,
In Time not Space ; and what the path is through
Is writ in shadowy scrolls not yet unfurl'd ;

And as they march, the pigeons waltz and coo
Upon their sunlit backs, when eve has curl'd
The still canals, as eve is wont to do.

ON A SURF-ROLLED TORSO OF VENUS.

DISCOVERED AT TRIPOLI VECCHIO.

ONE day, in the world's youth, long, long ago,
Before the golden hair of Time grew gray,
The bright warm sea, scarce stirred by dolphins' play,
Was swept by sudden music strange and low ;

And rippling with the kisses Zephyrs blow,
Gave forth a dripping goddess, whose strong sway
All earth, all air, all wave, was to obey,
Throned on a shell more rosy than dawn's glow.

And, lo, that self-same sea has now upthrown
A mutilated Venus, roll'd and roll'd
For centuries in surf, and who has grown

More soft, more chaste, more lovely than of old,
With every line made vague, so that the stone
Seems seen as through a veil which Ages hold.

FADING GLORIES.

I.

THE gold of nimbus and of background sky,
Around the auburn heads of sweet young saints
Still glows in frescoed cloisters ; but the paints
Are fading on the wall since Faith's good-bye.

And you, blond angel throngs, who stand and try
Your citherns' golden strings ; the colour faints
Upon your pure green robes, which mildew taints ;
You sing your last hosanna, ere you die.

The age that made the aureoled is long dead ;
The gold behind their heads is sinking sun,
And night will wrap them in its pall of lead :

They are the dream-shapes of a time when none
Hoped earthly good ; and long by man's dark bed
They stood and smiled. They fade ; their task is done.

II.

IN or and azure were they shrined of old,
Where led dim aisle to glowing stained-glass rose,
Like life's dim lane, with Heaven at its close;
Where censer swung, and organ-thunder rolled;

Where mitred, croziered, and superbly stoled,
Pale pontiffs gleamed, in dusky minster shows;
Where, like a soul that trembling skyward goes,
The Easter hymn soared up on wings of gold.

And now they stand with aureoles that time dims
Near young Greek fauns that pagan berries wreathe,
In crowded glaring galleries of dead art.

Their hands still fold; their lips still sing faint hymns;
Or are they prayers that beautiful shapes breathe
For shelter in some cold eclectic heart?

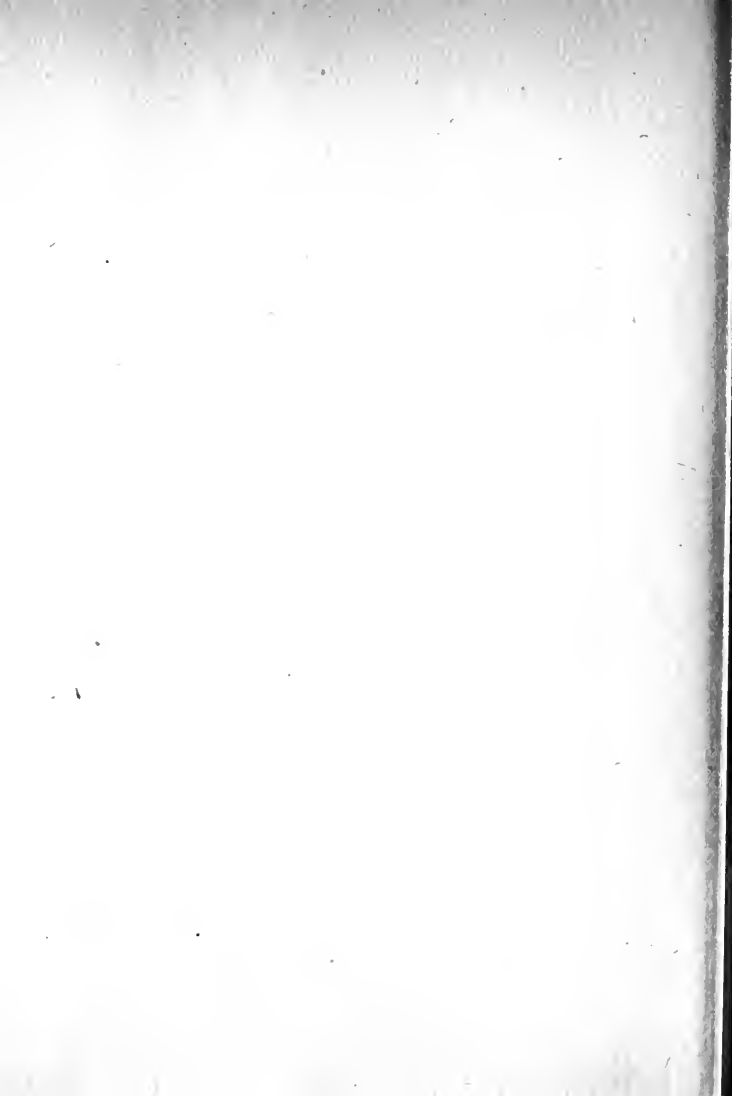
ON LEONARDO'S HEAD OF MEDUSA.

THE livid and unutterable head,
Fresh cut, lies welt'ring in its mane of snakes ;
A slowly writhing tangle which still takes
Its time to die, round temples that are dead ;

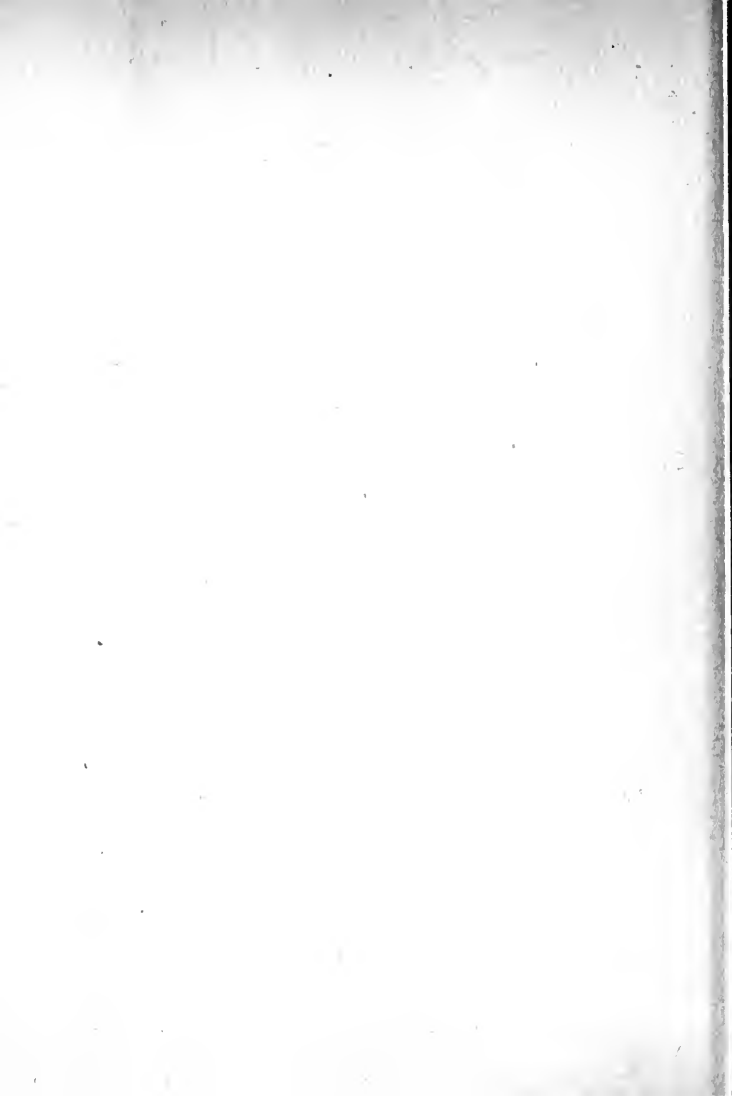
While through the lips, wet as with froth of lead,
Like the last breath of horror which forsakes
Evil's cut throat, a poisonous vapour makes
Its way from Hell to Heaven, vague and dread.

Already blind, the dying vipers grope,
Writhing in vain to leave the head they loathe,
Now that it lies there, gory, dead and wan ;

Each strangling each in coils of creeping rope,
Till death invades them from the brows they clothe,
And they coagulate. A toad looks on.



SECTION III.
LIFE AND FATE



THE RING OF FAUSTUS.

THERE is a tale of Faustus,—that one day
 Lucretia the Venetian, then his love,
 Had, while he slept, the rashness to remove
His magic ring, when fair as a god he lay ;

And that a sudden horrible decay
 O'erspread his face ; a hundred wrinkles wove
 Their network on his cheek ; while she above
His slumber crouched, and watched him shrivel away.

There is upon Life's hand a magic ring—
 The ring of Faith-in-Good, Life's gold of gold ;
Remove it not, lest all Life's charm take wing ;

Remove it not, lest straightway you behold
 Life's cheek fall in, and every earthly thing
Grow all at once unutterably old.

SUNKEN GOLD.

IN dim green depths rot ingot-laden ships ;
And gold doubloons, that from the drowned hand fell,
Lie nestled in the ocean-flower's bell
With love's old gifts, once kissed by long-drowned lips ;

And round some wrought gold cup the sea-grass whips,
And hides lost pearls, near pearls still in their shell,
Where sea-weed forests fill each ocean dell
And seek dim sunlight with their restless tips.

So lie the wasted gifts, the long-lost hopes
Beneath the now hushed surface of myself,
In lonelier depths than where the diver gropes ;

They lie deep, deep ; but I at times behold
In doubtful glimpses, on some reefy shelf,
The gleam of irrecoverable gold.

LIFE'S GAME.

LIFE'S Evil Genius with the sunless wings
And our white Guardian Angel sit and play
Their silent game of skill from day to day,
Where thoughts are pawns, and deeds are set as kings.

And every move on that strange chessboard brings
Some change in us—in what we do or say;
Till with our life the winner sweeps away
The last few pawns to which his rival clings.

We seem permitted, ever and anon,
To catch a glimpse of that great fatal game
By which our soul shall be or lost or won.

We watch one move, then turn away in shame;
But though we lack the courage to look on,
The game goes on without us all the same.

SOULAC.

A STRANGE square house, all battered, used to stand
Upon the Gascon coast, where sparse pines keep
A doubtful footing, as the salt winds sweep
The restless hillocks of ill-bladed sand.

A house? it was the bell-loft, Norman-plann'd,
Of long-lost Soulac's minster, buried deep
In sand, which Ocean never seized to heap
In its eternal battle with the land.

All else was gone: fit image of the fate
That overtakes the rich and stately pile
Which, arch on arch, life's early dreams create.

The real slowly clogs it, nave and aisle,
Transept and apse; and we are glad, if late,
Some humble vestige shelters us awhile.

BY THE FIRE.

I SAT beside the log-fire years ago,
And, in the dusk made forecasts by its flare,
Meting the Future out, to each his share,
While danced the restless shadows to and fro.

And when at last the yellow flame grew low
And leapt and licked no more, I still sat there
Watching with eyes fast fixed, but mind elsewhere
The darkening crimson of the flameless glow.

And now at dusk, I watch once more to-day
The slowly-sinking flame, the faint dull crash
Of crimson embers deadening into gray ;

But see alone the Past, misspent and rash,
And wasted gifts, and chances thrown away.
The Present and the Future ? All is ash.

LETHE.

I HAD a dream of Lethe,—of the brink
Of sluggish waters, whither strong men bore
Dead pallid loves; while others, old and sore,
Brought but their tottering selves, in haste to drink:

And having drunk, they plunged, and seemed to sink
Their load of love or guilt for evermore,
Reaching with radiant brow the sunny shore
That lay beyond, no more to think and think.

Oh, who will give me, chained to Memory's strand,
A draught of Lethe, salt with final tears,
Were it one drop within the hollow hand?

Oh, who will rid me of the wasted years,
The thought of life's fair structure vainly planned,
And each false hope that mocking reappears?

HOUNDS OF FATE.

THE Spaniards trained their bloodhounds once to play
A fearful part in battle, and to track
The Indians in the swamps where they fell back ;
And every hound received a soldier's pay.

Sooner or later, where the Indians lay,
Hiding their last red gold from screw and rack,
Scenting men's flesh, appeared the Cuban pack
And filled the forest with their booming bay.

And so the hounds of Fate have hunted down
The luckless owners of the virgin gold
Which we call Genius, since the world began ;

Save that the hunted Indians are unknown,
While poet and discoverer are enrolled
In bitter glory on the Book of Man.

THE 'EISERNE JUNGFRAU.'

TO FATE.

THOU art that Virgin all of screws and steel,
Born in some feudal dungeon of the Rhine,
Whose arms were lined with knives ; whose gory shrine
Stood in the torture-room with rack and wheel.

First at her feet they made the victim kneel,
Then kiss her lips ; and, on a silent sign,
Her steel arms opened—daggers line on line—
And gave the hug that never walls reveal.

Thy arms of horror close not upon all :
Long whiles they never move ; and nothing shows
What means the silent riddle of thy face.

But now and then, when scarcely we recall
What thing thou art, they turn upon their screws
And lock us in their murderous embrace.

THE SLEDGE.

MEN throw their better instincts to their worse
Much as that Russian mother threw her young
Out of the sledge, to stop the wolves that sprung
Faster and faster than the maddened horse.

With each new victim, taking fresher force,
The wild pursuit goes on with shriller tongue ;
Another and another child is flung
In dizzy panic and without remorse ;

The snow-clad firs fly past in endless line ;
But faster bound the wolves, still eight or nine,
Nearer and nearer, brazen-eyed and shrill ;

And when the furious courser stops at last,
Vaguely we look around for what we cast
Out of Life's sledge, as if we had it still.

THE WRECK ROCK BELL.

ABOVE Life's waves, with wild ill-omened toll,
Just like that warning buoy-bell which is washed
By livid breakers, where a ship has crashed,
I hear a bell of shipwreck in my soul.

The bitter waste surrounds it ; woe's waves roll
For ever t'wards it ; spray of hope long dashed
Leaps over it ; and, ever faster lashed,
It howls its dirge of ruin on the shoal.

'Too late, too late,' it thunders through the dark,
With brazen tongue, that drips eternal brine,
'Thy race is run ; thou wouldst not heed or hark.

'Too late, too late. Man sails, by foul or fine,
One voyage only in his life's swift bark ;
One and no more. What made thee shipwreck thine ?'

THE SILENT FELLOW.

'WHO art thou, silent brother? Art thou Pain,—
In face so like me; sitting on the bed
In which I lie?'—'Pain for to-day has said
Good-night.'—'Then Weariness?'—'No; wrong again.'

Thou hast a branch of bay, still wet with rain :
Art thou my former self, from years long fled?
Or Hope or Loneliness?'—'No, Hope is dead,
And thy old self lies low in Time's dull plain.

'None of all these am I; although men say
I have a look of all. The part I play
Is to reflect what stronger gods control:

'I am thy Sonnet Spirit; and to-day
I bring a branch of Dead Sea fruit, not bay,
Plucked by the bitter waters of the soul.'

NERO'S SAND.

ONCE, under Nero, there was lack of bread
In mighty Rome ; and eyes were strained to meet
The ships from Egypt, laden with the wheat
With which the Mistress of the World was fed.

But when at last, with every swelled sail spread,
They hove in sight, there ran from street to street
A sudden rumour that the longed-for fleet
Brought sand for Nero's circuses instead.

So Fate misfreights the vessel of our lives
Which might have carried grain of very gold
And fills it to the water-mark with sand ;

And Folly's breezes helping, it arrives
Safely in port, where Death unloads the hold,
And all the cheated angels round it stand.

MEETING OF GHOSTS.

WHEN years have passed, is't wise to meet again ?
Body and Mind have changed ; and is it wise
To take old Time, the Alterer, by surprise,
And see how he has worked in human grain ?

We think that what once was, must still remain ;
Ourself a ghost, we bid a ghost arise ;
Two spectres look into each other's eyes,
And break the image that their hearts contain.

Mix not the Past and Present : let the Past
Remain in peace within its jewelled shrine,
And drag it not into the hum and glare ;

Mix not two faces in the thoughts that last ;
The one thou knewest, fair in every line,
And one unknown, which may be far from fair.

THE RANSOM OF PERU.

THE conquered Inca to Pizarro said :

‘I swear to fill this hall with virgin gold,
As high as any Spaniard here can hold
His steel-gloved hand, if thou wilt spare my head.’

Then streamed the ingots from their rocky bed :

For weeks and weeks the tide of treasure roll’d
To reach the mark ; but when the sum was told,
The victor only strangled him instead.

And many have said to Fate: ‘If I may eat

Life’s sweet coarse bread, the ransom shall be pour’d
In rhymes of gold at thy victorious feet.’

But like Pizarro waiting for his hoard,

Fate gave them chains ; and letting them complete
The glittering heap, then drew the strangling cord.

SIAMESE TWINS.

KNOW you how died those twins, famed far and near,
Who, tethered hip to hip, with Fate's strong thread,
Were forced to walk through life with equal tread,
And to be friends and share at last one bier?

How one awoke one day, and could not hear
His brother's breath, and felt, and found him dead;
And how, compelled to share a dead man's bed,
He died of an unutterable fear?

Body and Mind have link of like dread kind:
Woe to the Body, blind and helpless clod,
That wakes one day, and hears the Mind no more;

But ten times woe to the surviving Mind,
Born to create, command, and play the god:
Bound to a corpse, it struggles still to soar.

CÆSAR'S GHOST.

IN that sharp war where Cæsar's slayers died,
There was a moment when it seemed decreed,
As sank the sun blood-red in clumps of reed,
That victory should take the guilty side :

But just as they were winning fast and wide,
The ghost of Cæsar, on a phantom steed,
Bore down on Cassius with a soundless speed,
And with a sword of shadow turned the tide.

I think that in Life's battle, now and then,
The ghost of some high impulse or great plan,
Which they have murdered, may appear to men,

And, like the shade of Cæsar, check the van
Of their success, though odds to one be ten,
And cow their soul, as only phantoms can.

A SPANISH LEGEND.

THERE is a story in a Spanish book,
About a noisy reveller, who, one night,
Returning home with others, saw a light
Shine from a window, and climbed up to look;

And saw, within the room, hanged to a hook,
His own self-strangled self, grim, rigid, white;
And, stricken sober by that livid sight,
Feasting his eyes, in wordless horror shook.

Has any man a fancy to look in,
And see as through a window, in the Past,
His nobler self, self-choked with coils of sin,

Or sloth, or folly?—round the throat whipped fast,
The nooses give the face a stiffened grin:
'Tis but thyself; look well; why be aghast?

IN THE WOOD OF DEAD SEA FRUIT.

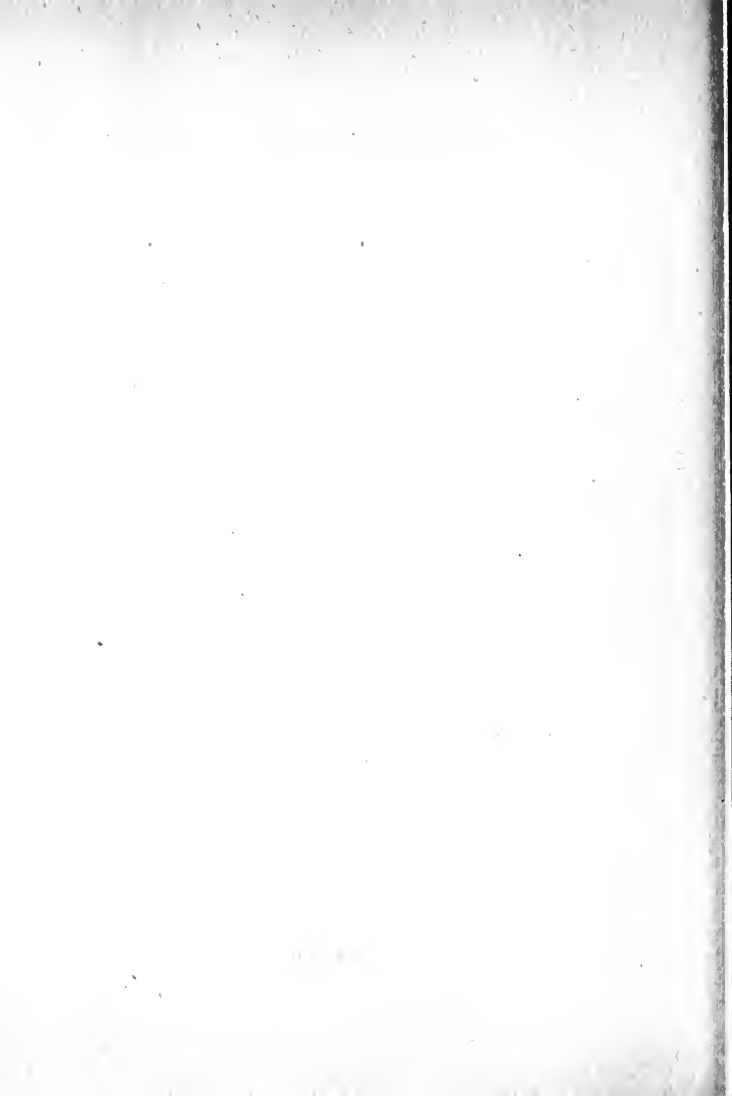
I LAY beneath the trees of Dead Sea Fruit,
Whose every leaf records a life's mistake;
And pored with eyes eternally awake
Upon the bitter waters at their root;

Searching dead chances; letting If's eyes shoot
Through depths that profitable thoughts forsake
As birds forsake Avernus, when the lake
Yields its old fumes, that numb both man and brute.

This is the pool which mirrors him who bends
Over its stillness, such as once he was,
Not such as now he is, in face and eyes:

Its depths are strewn with all that youth misspends;
With all the wasted chances that life has;
And there all Ophir, all Golconda, lies.

SECTION IV.
THE AFTER-LIFE.



WAIFS OF A WORLD.

LONG ere Columbus in the breeze unfurled
His venturous sail to hunt the setting sun,
Long ere he fired his first exultant gun
Where strange canoes all round his flagship whirled,

The unsailed ocean which the west wind curled
Had born strange waifs to Europe, one by one :
Wood carved by Indian hands, and trees like none
Which men then knew, from an untrodden world.

Oh for a waif from o'er that wider sea
Whose margin is the grave, and where we think
A gem-bepebbled continent may be !

But all in vain we watch upon the brink ;
No waif floats up from black infinity,
Where all who venture out for ever sink.

SEA-SHELL MURMURS.

THE hollow sea-shell which for years hath stood
On dusty shelves, when held against the ear
Proclaims its stormy parent; and we hear
The faint far murmur of the breaking flood.

We hear the sea. The sea? It is the blood
In our own veins, impetuous and near,
And pulses keeping pace with hope and fear
And with our feelings' every shifting mood.

Lo, in my heart I hear, as in a shell,
The murmur of a world beyond the grave,
Distinct, distinct, though faint and far it be.

Thou fool; this echo is a cheat as well,—
The hum of earthly instincts; and we crave
A world unreal as the shell-heard sea.

IDLE CHARON.

THE shores of Styx are lone for evermore,
And not one shadowy form upon the steep
Looms through the dusk, far as the eye can sweep,
To call the ferry over as of yore ;

But tintless rushes, all about the shore,
Have hemmed the old boat in, where, locked in sleep,
Hoar-bearded Charon lies ; while pale weeds creep
With tightening grasp all round the unused oar.

For in the world of Life strange rumours run
That now the Soul departs not with the breath,
But that the Body and the Soul are one ;

And in the loved one's mouth, now, after death,
The widow puts no obol, nor the son,
To pay the ferry in the world beneath.

THE OBOL.*

SCARCE have I rhymed of Charon looming gray
Amid pale rushes, through the dusky air,
And of the obol we no longer care
To put in dead men's mouths as ferry-pay,

When, lo, I find, among some pence, to-day
Received as common change, I know not where,
A stray Greek obol, seeming Charon's fare
To put between my lips when I be clay.

Poor bastard Obol, even couldst thou cheat
The shadowy Boatman, I should scarcely find
The heart to cross : extinction seems so sweet.

I need thee not ; and thou shalt be consigned
To some old whining beggar in the street,
Whose soul shall cross, while mine shall stay behind.

* The coin referred to in this sonnet was a modern Greek piece of five lepta, rather smaller than a halfpenny, and bearing the word *Obolos* on the reverse.

ACHERON.

WHERE rolls in silent speed through cave on cave
Soul-freighted Acheron, and no other light
Evokes the rocks from an eternal night
Than the pale phosphorescence of the wave,

Shall men not meet, and have one chance to crave
Forgiveness for rash deeds—one chance to right
Old earthly quarrels, and, in Death's despite,
Unsay the said, and heal the pang they gave?

See, see! there looms from yonder soul-filled barque
That passes ours, a long-loved, long-lost face,
And with a cry we stretch our ghostly arms.

But heeding not, they whirl into the dark,
Bound for a sea beyond all time and space,
Which neither life nor love nor sunlight warms.

THE PHANTOM SHIP.

WE touch Life's shore as swimmers from a wreck
Who shudder at the cheerless land they reach,
And find their comrades gathered on the beach
Watching a fading sail, a small white speck—

The phantom ship, upon whose ample deck
There seemed awhile a homeward place for each.
The crowd still wring their hands and still beseech,
But see, it fades, in spite of prayer and beck.

Let those who hope for brighter shores no more
Not mourn, but turning inland, bravely seek
What hidden wealth redeems the iron shore.

The strong must build stout cabins for the weak ;
Must plan and plough ; must sow and reap and store ;
For grain takes root, though all seems bare and bleak.

MY OWN HEREAFTER.

WHERE angel trumpets hail a brighter sun
With their superb alarum, and the flash
Of angel cymbals dazzles as they clash,
Seek not to find me, when my sands are run ;

Nor where, in mail of sapphire every one,
God's sentries man the walls, that Light's waves wash
With an eternal angel-heard faint plash—
But in some book of sonnets, when day's done.

There in the long June twilight, as you read,
You will encounter my immortal parts,
If any such I have, from earth's clay freed ;

Divested of their sins, to be the seed
Perhaps of some slight good in other's hearts.
That is the only after-life I need.

WINE OF OMAR KHAYYĀM.

HE rode the flame-winged dragon-steed of Thought
Through Space and Darkness, seeking Heav'n and Hell;
And searched the furthest stars where souls might dwell
To find God's justice; and in vain he sought.

Then, looking on the dusk-eyed girl who brought
His dream-filled wine beside his garden well,
He said: 'Her kiss; the wine-jug's drowsy spell;
Bulbul; the roses; death;—all else is naught:

'So drink till that.'—What, drink, because the abyss
Of Nothing waits? because there is for man
But one swift hour of consciousness and light?

No.—Just because we have no life but this,
Turn it to use; be noble while you can;
Search, help, create; then pass into the night.

A FLIGHT FROM GLORY.

ONCE, from the parapet of gems and glow,
An Angel said, 'O God, the heart grows cold
On these eternal battlements of gold,
Where all is pure, but cold as virgin snow.

'Here sobs are never heard; no salt tears flow;
Here there are none to help—nor sick nor old;
No wrong to fight, no justice to uphold:
Grant me Thy leave to live man's life below.'

'And then annihilation?' God replied.
'Yes,' said the Angel, 'even that dread price;
For earthly tears are worth eternal night.'

'Then go,' said God.—The Angel opened wide
His dazzling wings, gazed back on Heaven thrice,
And plunged for ever from the walls of Light.

FIREFLIES.

Now one by one the live winged sparks of night,
Like souls allowed to wander as they please
Through old loved haunts, go by between the trees
In silent zigzags of alternate light;

And grow in number, bodiless and bright,
So that the eye, too slow to count them, sees
Nothing but fire all round; till by degrees
Quenched in the dawn, they vanish from the sight.

And those more subtle sparks, which they recall,
The countless souls with which regret and love
Once peopled Death's great night, are they quenched too?

Has Thought's strong dawn, which searches into all,
Reached even them, unpeopling Heaven above,
To leave us nothing but the empty blue?

ALL SOULS' DAY.

I.

ALL SOULS' DAY'S wintry light is on the wane ;
The Tuscan furrows darken deeper brown :
And still the sower, ever up and down,
Is hard at work, broad scattering his grain :

As since dim times, again and yet again
(Beginning with old nations scarcely known,
Pelasgi and Etruscans) he has thrown
His seed upon this old Italic plain.

And what became of all those shadowy dead
Who sowed their wheat, built Cyclopean walls
And left their lives unwritten on man's scrolls ?

Just what became of what they sowed for bread—
Of grain that breeds fresh grain that falls and falls :
Earth had their bones ; and who shall find their souls ?

II.

WHAT heavens that grow, what hells that still expand,
Would hold the close-packed souls of all who found
Earth's bread or sweet or bitter, and were bound
In sheaves of shadow by the silent hand—

The close-packed souls of every time and land ;
Millions of millions mingled with the ground ;
Of all the mounded mummy-dust all round ;
Who, back' on earth, would fight for room to stand,

Nor find his square foot each?—But dusk has grown ;
The fields are empty ; day is dying fast ;
And, save one figure, all is gray and lone ;

The figure of the sower who has cast
Wheat for the quick where countless dead have sown,
And passes ghost-like on his way at last.

THE WRECK OF HEAVEN.

I.

I HAD a vision : naught for miles and miles
But shattered columns, shattered walls of gold,
And precious stones that from their place had roll'd,
And lay in heaps, with litter'd golden tiles ;

While, here and there, amid the ruined piles
Of gold and sardius, and their sparkling mould,
Wild tufts of amaranth had taken hold,
Scenting the golden desert like sweet isles.

And not one soul, and not one step nor sound,
Until there started up a haggard head
Out of the gold, from somewhere underground.

Wildly he eyed me and the wreck all round :
'Who'rt thou ?' quoth I. He shrilled a laugh and said:
'The last of souls. I haunt this dazzling mound.'

II.

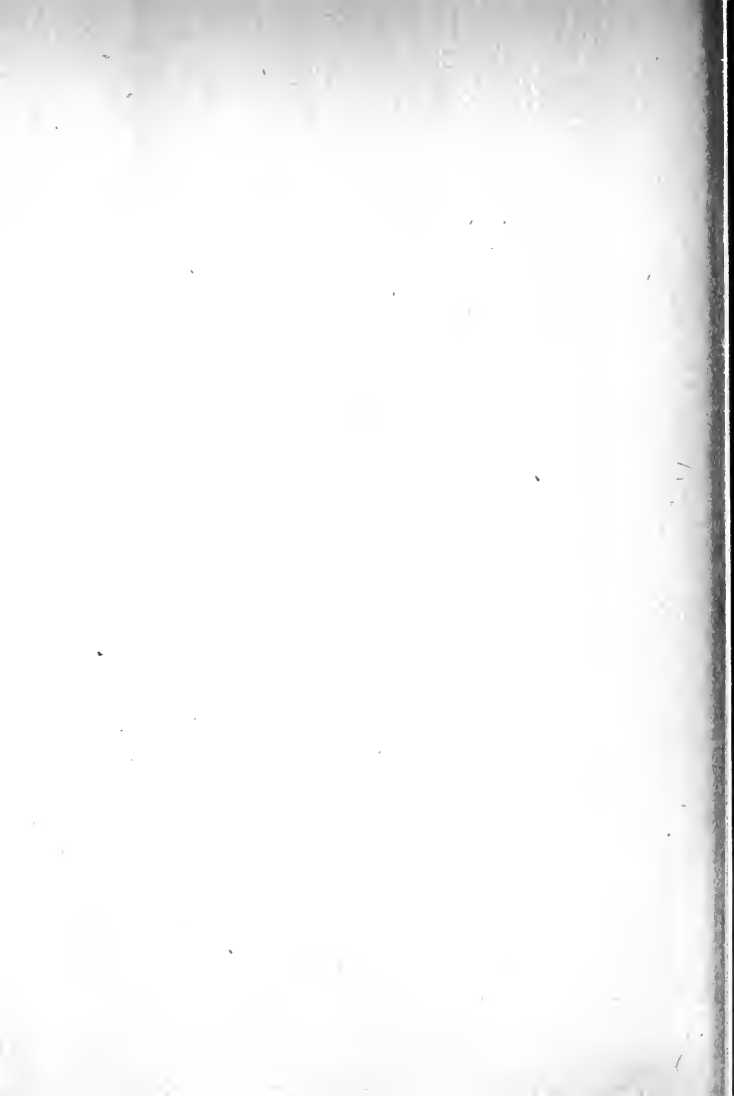
Ay, ay, the gates of pearl are crumbling fast;
The walls of beryl topple stone by stone;
The throngs of souls in white and gold are gone;
The jasper pillars lie where they were cast;

The roofless halls of gold are dumb and vast;
The courts of jacinth are for ever lone;
Through shattered chrysolite the blind winds moan;
And topaz moulders into earth at last.

And earth is the reality: its hue
Is brown and sad; its face is hard to till;
Upon man's brow the sweat must hang like dew.

But grain takes root, in valley, plain and hill,
Tho' never Heaven's amaranth here grew.
And grain breeds grain, and more and more grain still.

SECTION V.
MISCELLANEOUS.



WHAT THE SONNET IS.

FOURTEEN small broidered berries on the hem
Of Circe's mantle, each of magic gold ;
Fourteen of lone Calypso's tears that roll'd
Into the sea, for pearls to come of them ;

Fourteen clear signs of omen in the gem
With which Medea human fate foretold ;
Fourteen small drops, which Faustus, growing old,
Craved of the Fiend, to water Life's dry stem.

It is the pure white diamond Dante brought
To Beatrice ; the sapphire Laura wore
When Petrarch cut it sparkling out of thought ;

The ruby Shakespeare hewed from his heart's core ;
The dark, deep emerald that Rossetti wrought
For his own soul, to wear for evermore.

WINTER.

Now is the time when Nature may display
Her frosty jewelry in all men's eyes,
And every breeze that through the brushwood sighs
Brings down her brilliants in a glittering spray.

Like drops of blood upon the snow-strewn way,
The crimson berries lie, the robins' prize;
While, in the leafless woods, the poor man tries
To find some faggots for the bitter day.

On every sleeping pool the winter fits
With unseen hand a strong and glassy lid;
The frightened fish beneath the skater flits,

And quaking, in the lowest depths lies hid;
And old King Christmas at his revel sits,
Where all whom hunger pinches not are bid.

SONNET GOLD.

I.

WE get it from Etruscan tombs, hid deep
Beneath the passing ploughshare ; or from caves
Known but to Prospero, where pale-green waves
Have rolled the wreck-gold, which the mermaids keep

And from the caverns, where the gnomes up-heap
The secret treasures, which the Earth's dwarf slaves
Coin in her bosom, till the red gold paves
Her whole great heart, where only poets peep ;

Or from old missals, where the gold defies
Time's hand, in saints' bright aureoles, and keeps,
In angels' long straight trumpets, all its flash ;

But chiefly from the crucible, where lies
The alchymist's pure dream-gold.—While he sleeps
The poet steals it, leaving him the ash.

II.

WHAT shall we make of sonnet gold for men?
The dove-wreathed cup some youth to Phryne gave?
Or dark Locusta's phial which shall have
Chiselled all round it, snakes from Horror's den?

Or that ill ring, which sank in fathoms ten,
When Faliero spoused the Venice wave?
Or Inez' funeral crown, the day the grave
Showed her for coronation, all myrrh then?

The best to make would be a hilt of gold
For Life's keen falchion,—like a dragon's head
Fierce and fantastic, massive in your hold;

But oft our goldsmith's chisel carves, instead,
A fretted shrine, for sorrows that are old
And passions that are sterile, or are dead.

OBERON'S LAST COUNCIL.

I.

IF, on some woodland lawn, you see a ring
Of darker hue upon the paler grass—
The strange green growth which children as they pass
Still tell each other is a fairy thing

Left by the Elves o'er-night—let your soul cling
To the sweet thought that there the Elf King was
With all his crew at dawn ; but that, alas !
They met there for their last, last gathering.

For they are fled : and though the sunshine still
Dances in flecks, as dance the leaves above,
And still the squirrel nibbles and the mouse,

The little folk are gone who used to fill
The hazel copses where the wild wood-dove
With cross-laid twigs still builds her breezy house.

II.

HE called a last assembly of the Elves.
Hundreds of Fairies in the forest met
Round one huge oak-tree—Sprites of dry and wet,
Pixies and Imps, and every gnome that delves:

And Oberon said: 'We lurk by tens and twelves,
Starved in the woods. Man's faith—our food as yet—
Feeds us no more; the Fairies' sun has set:
We are but shadows of our former selves.

'Tis time to leave the woods and we must part.
When faith quite ends—so say the High Decrees—
Then death will strike us with his icy dart.

Long have we nestled in the hearts of trees;
Now we must nestle in the Poet's heart—
The only place where fairies never freeze.'

IN MEMORIAM.

MARSTON, mourn not ; Rossetti is not dead,
Though chill as clay is now his shrouded brow
Nor grudge the grave the flesh it gathers now
The soul remains, to live on earth instead.

And thou that wast his friend, if e'er I said
A word in harshness, hear me disavow,
While such small wreath as I can wreathe I throw
Upon the stone that covers now his head.

The wintry breath of Azrael hath swept
A green leaf to the heap of bygone leaves
Where Alighieri and where Shakespeare lie.

Mourn not. Each day some brother dies unwept,
But he for whom the distant stranger grieves,
Outlives mere life ; for men he doth not die.

April 14, 1882.

ROMAN BATHS.

THERE were some Roman baths where we spent hours:
Immense and lonely courts of rock-like brick,
All overgrown with verdure strong and thick,
And girding sweet wild lawns all full of flowers.

One day, beneath the turf, green with the showers
Of all the centuries since Genseric,
They found rich pavements hidden by Time's trick,
Adorned with tritons, dolphins, doves like ours.

So, underneath the surface of To-day,
Lies yesterday, and what we call the Past,
The only thing which never can decay.

Things bygone are the only things that last:
The Present is mere grass, quick-mown away;
The Past is stone, and stands for ever fast.

SPRING.

THERE lurks a sadness in the April air
For those who note the fate of earthly things;
A dreamy sense of what the future brings
To those too good, too hopeful or too fair.

An underthought of heartache, as it were,
Blends with the pæan that the new leaf sings;
And, as it were, a breeze from Death's great wings
Shakes down the blossoms that the fruit-trees bear.

The tide of sap flows up the forest trees;
The birds exult in every bough on high;
The ivy bloom is full of humming bees;

But if you list, you hear the latent sigh;
And each new leaf that rustles in the breeze
Proclaims the boundless mutability.

TO PHILIP MARSTON.

To walk in darkness through the sunlit wood,
And know no leaves but dead ones on the ground,
While Spring's young green is waving all around,
And joyous Nature spurns her widowhood ;

To have no share in each successive mood
Of wayward Day, by Night for ever bound ;
To know the Morn but by the growing sound,
Eve by its chill, not by its Sunset flood :

Such is thy portion in this world of light,
Where only voices—more like souls set free
Than living men—surround thee in thy plight.

God said from out the Darkness, 'Let Light be' ;
And Day sprang dazzling from the lap of Night.
Alas, my Friend, He said it not for thee.

OXFORD.

So you will see what I can see no more ;
The old black stone, all round the bright young grass ;
The towers, panelled halls, and fair stained glass ;
The sunlit turf through some old oaken door ;

And that green river with the sedgy shore ;
The motley barges, and the huddled mass
Of breathless cheerers, as the swift eights pass
In desperate race, with long bent feathering oar.

The years go by, and all is fading fast ;
The crowd in cap and gown are mere ghosts now
And that bright river glides into the Past ;

The colleges and elm-girt towers grow
Each year more unsubstantial than the last,
Like fair dissolving views that lose their glow.

MUSSET'S LOUIS D'OR.

ASLEEP, a little fisher-girl one day
Lay on the shingle in an old boat's shade;
Her skirt was tattered, and the sea-breeze played
With her brown loosened hair a ceaseless play.

A poet chanced to pass as there she lay;
Her sun-burnt face, her tatters he surveyed;
A golden coin between her lips he laid,
And, letting her sleep on, he went his way.

What came of that gold windfall? Did it breed
Those long-loved coins which patient thrift can show
With proud pure smile, to meet the household need?

Or stolen gold? or those curst coins which grow
Each year more sought, more loathed, and are the meed
Of women's loveless kisses? Who can know?

PROMETHEAN FANCIES.

I.

WHEN on to shuddering Caucasus God pours
The phials of his fury hoarded long,
Plunging in each abyss his fiery prong
As if to find a Titan ; when loud roars

The imprisoned thunder groping for the doors
Of never-ending gorges ; when, among
The desperate pines, Storm howls his battle song—
Then wakes Prometheus, and his voice upsoars.

Yea, when the midnight tempest hurries past,
There sounds within its wail a wilder wail
Than that which tells the anguish of the blast ;

And when the thunder thunders down the gale,
A laugh within its laugh tells woe so vast
That God's own angels in the darkness quail.

II.

PROMETHEUS—none may see him. But at night,
When heaven's bolt has made some forest flare
On Caucasus, and when the broad red glare
Flushes from crag to crag at infinite height,

Staining the snow, or running ruby-bright
Along the myriad glacier-crests to scare
The screaming eagles out of black chasms, where,
But half dislodged, the dark still grapples tight:

Then on some lurid monstrous wall of rock
The Titan's shadow suddenly appears
Gigantic, flickering, vague; and, storm-unfurled,

Seems still to brave, with hand that dim chains lock
Midway in the unendingness of years,
The Author of the miscreated world.

GOLD OF MIDAS.

THE poet is the alchymist of thought—
The Midas whose too sovereign touch, of old,
Transmuted every trifle into gold,
And gilt the very clay the potter wrought.

No common mountain torrent he has sought
And bathed his soul in, but has straightway roll'd
Auriferous sands; no maze where he has stroll'd,
But gleams with ponderous ingots rich as aught

That Midas ever gilt.—But woe, thrice woe,
If, locked in his own gold, he should forget,
Like that same Midas, how and why we live :

He craved a Universe of gold ; and lo,
The bread became a nugget as he ate,
And filled his mouth with all that gold can give.

BAUDELAIRE.

A PARIS gutter of the good old times,
Black and putrescent in its stagnant bed,
Save where the shamle oozings fringe it red,
Or scaffold trickles, or nocturnal crimes.

It holds dropped gold; dead flowers from tropic climes;
Gems true and false, by midnight maskers shed;
Old pots of rouge; old broken phials that spread
Vague fumes of musk, with fumes from slums and slimes.

And everywhere, as glows the set of day,
There floats upon the winding fetid mire
The gorgeous iridescence of decay:

A wavy film of colour, gold and fire,
Trembles all through it as you pick your way,
And streaks of purple that are straight from Tyre.

NIGHT.

THOU heedest not, inexorable Night,
Whether besought from some lone prison cell
To stay thy hours, by one whose dying knell
Will sound not later than return of light,

Or prayed to urge them by some suffering wight
Who notes their creep as wearily and well
As men not for eternity in Hell
May note the purging flames' decreasing height.

Hark ! in the street I hear a distant sound
Of music and of laughter and of song,
As go a band of revellers their round :

And under prison-walls it comes along,
And under dull sick-rooms, where moans abound ;
For who shall grudge their strumming to the strong ?

THE DEATH OF PUCK.

I.

I FEAR that Puck is dead—it is so long
Since men last saw him—dead with all the rest
Of that sweet elfin crew that made their nest
In hollow huts, where hazels sing their song ;

Dead and for ever, like the antique throng
The elves replaced ; the Dryad that you guessed
Behind the leaves ; the Naiad weed-bedressed ;
The leaf-eared Faun that loved to lead you wrong.

Tell me, thou hopping Robin, hast thou met
A little man, no bigger than thyself,
Whom they call Puck, where woodland bells are wet ?

Tell me, thou Wood-Mouse, hast thou seen an elf
Whom they call Puck, and is he seated yet,
Capped with a snail-shell, on his mushroom shelf ?

II.

THE Robin gave three hops, and chirped, and said :
‘Yes, I knew Puck, and loved him ; though I trow
He mimicked oft my whistle chuckling low ;
Yes, I knew cousin Puck ; but he is dead.

We found him lying on his mushroom bed—
The Wren and I—half covered up with snow,
As we were hopping where the berries grow.
We think he died of cold. Ay, Puck is fled.’

And then the Wood-Mouse said : ‘We made the Mole
Dig him a little grave beneath the moss,
And four big Dormice placed him in the hole.

The Squirrel made with sticks a little cross ;
Puck was a Christian elf, and had a soul ;
And all we velvet jackets mourn his loss.’

TO FLORENCE SNOW.

FOR THE FLY-LEAF OF A BOOK OF SONNETS.

I SEND these berries which in sweet woods grew ;
Small crimson crans, on which has slept the deer ;
Spiked red-dropt butcher's broom, the bare foot's fear ;
Blue berries of the whortle wet with dew ;

And gummy berries of the tragic yew ;
With mistletoe,—each bead a waxen tear ;
And ripe blue sloes that mark a frosty year ;
And hips and haws, from lanes that Keats once knew.

I know not if the berries of the West
Are such as those of Europe ; but I know
That Kansas breeds a flower, which, unguessed,

Can climb up prison-walls, and gently grow
Through prison-bars where suffering has its nest,
And where the wingless hours crawl sad and slow.

TO A HANDFUL OF MUMMY WHEAT.

THOU'RT older than would be that pale gold wheat
Which, on a harvest evening, in the youth
Of fields of corn, the wistful gleaner Ruth
Saw in the fragrant twilight at her feet.

Wave after wave of human life has beat
Against the silent tomb in which, like truth
Locked in dark error, thou hast braved the tooth
Of nibbling Time, safe in a mummy's sheet.

Go forth, go forth, that once again the sun
May kiss thee into ripeness, and the breath
Of morn make ripples in thy golden dun ;

And multiply till every grain beneath
My finger, fills a garner ; so that none
May say that in the Past there is but Death.

ON THE FLY-LEAF OF DANTE'S 'VITA NUOVA.'

THERE was a tall stern Exile once of old,
Who paced Verona's streets as dusk shades fell,
With step as measured as the vesper bell,
And face half-hidden by his hood's dark fold;

One whom the children, as he grimly stroll'd,
Would shrink from in the fear of a vague spell,
Crying, 'The man who has been down to Hell,'
Or hanging in his footsteps, if more bold.

This little book is not by that stern man,
But by his younger self, such as he seems
In Giotto's fresco, holding up the flower,

Thinking of her whose hand, by Fate's strange plan,
He never touched on earth, but who, in dreams,
Oft led him into Heaven for an hour.

FAITH.

THERE is a startling legend that is known
To Spanish scholars : how the fertile land
For years was ravaged by a robber band,
Led by a Knight with visor ever down ;

And how, at last, when he was overthrown,
The shape which made so desperate a stand
And quivered still, was found to be, when scann'd,
A suit of armour, empty heel to crown.

Nought fights like Emptiness.—Beneath the veil
Of Islam's warlike Prophet, from Bagdad
To Roncevaux, it made the nations quail ;

And once, as Templar and Crusader clad,
It shook the world.—Ev'n now, Faith's empty mail
Still writhes and struggles with the life it had.

FUMES OF CHARCOAL.

September, 1889.

I.

DEATH has no shape more stealthy.—There you sit,
With all unchanged around you, in your chair,
Watching the wavy tremor of the air
Above the little brazier you have lit,

While Death begins to amorously flit
In silent circles round you, till he dare
Touch with his lips, and, crouching o'er you there,
Kiss you all black, and freeze you bit by bit.

Yet she could walk upon the bracing heath,
When steams the dew beneath the morning-sun,
And draw the freshness of the mountain's breath :

Were charcoal fumes more sweet as, one by one,
Life's lights went out, beneath that kiss of Death,
And, turning black, the life-blood ceased to run ?

II.

IF some new Dante in the shades below,
While crossing that wan wood, where the self slain,
Changed into conscious trees, soothe their dull pain
By sighs and plaints, as tears can never flow,

Should hear an English voice, like west wind low,
Come from the latest tree, and, letting strain
His ear against its trunk, should hear quite plain
The soul's heart tick within, though faint and slow :

Then let him ask : 'O Amy, in the land
Of the sweet light and of the sweet live air,
Did you ne'er sit beside a friend's wheeled bed,

That you could thus destroy, at Hell's command,
All that he envied you, and choke the fair
Young flame of life, to dwell with the wan dead ?'

III

ON THE FLY-LEAF OF LEOPARDI'S POEMS.

THERE was a hunchback in a slavish day,
Crushed out of shape by Heaven's iron weight,
Who made the old Italic string vibrate
In Freedom's harp, on which few dared to play ;

A Titan's soul in Æsop's cripple clay ;
A dwarf Prometheus, blasted by Jove's hate,
Who scorned the God that held him locked in fate,
And called the world the mud in which he lay.

And mud it is ; but mud which can be tilled
To grow the wheat, the olive, and the grape,
And fill more garners than men's hands can build.

And those bare tracts, whence all would fain escape,
Conceal, perchance, some buried urn all filled
With golden Darics stamped with a winged shape.

THE GRAVE OF OMAR KHAYYÁM.

THEY washed his body with a wine of gold,
And wrapped it round, to meet his last desire,
In leaves of vine, whose every pale green spire
Tightened about him with an amorous hold;

And then they buried him in vineyard mould,
Where vintage hymns in Summer's dusk expire,
And where great vine-roots sucked all round him fire
For fiery cups, as ages o'er him roll'd.

A lethargy creeps o'er us on this spot
Where bulbul warbles on Oblivion's brink,
And all that man should live for is forgot.

The wine-girl floats towards us with her cup;
Or is it Azrael with darker drink?
Wake up, wake up; shake free thy soul; wake up!

TO MY TORTOISE ANANKÉ.

SAY it were true, that thou outliv'st us all,
O footstool once of Venus; come, renew
Thy tale of old Greek isles, where thy youth grew
In myrtle shadow, near her temple wall;

Or tell me how the eagle let thee fall
Upon the Greek bard's head, from heaven's blue,
And Apathy killed Song.—And is it true
That thy domed shell would bear a huge stone ball?

O Tortoise, Tortoise, there are weights, alack,
Heavier than stone, and viewless as the air,
Which none have ever tried upon thy back;

Which, ever and anon, we men must bear;
Weights which would make thy solid cover crack;
And how we bear them, let those ask who care.

EPILOGUE TO THESE SONNETS.

I WROUGHT them like a targe of hammered gold
On which all Troy is battling round and round ;
Or Circe's cup, embossed with snakes that wound
Through buds and myrtles, fold on scaly fold ;

Or like gold coins, which Lydian tombs may hold,
Stamped with winged racers, in the old red ground ;
Or twined gold armlets from the funeral mound
Of some great viking, terrible of old.

I know not in what metal I have wrought ;
Nor whether what I fashion will be thrust
Beneath the clods that hide forgotten thought ;

But if it is of gold it will not rust ;
And when the time is ripe it will be brought
Into the sun, and glitter through its dust.



Elliot & Stock, 62, Paternoster Row, London, E.C.





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Lee-Hamilton, Eugene
Sonnets of the wingless
hours

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